

(Reprint from THE NORTH CAROLINA MEDICAL JOURNAL November, 1951)

EUGENIC STERILIZATION IN NORTH CAROLINA

CLARENCE J. GAMBLE, M. D.

MILTON. MASSACHUSETTS

One method of preventive medicine, the sterilization of the insane, the feebleminded, and the epileptic, is supervised by the Eugenics Board of North Carolina. The Board's biennial report for the period ending July 1, 1950, tells of its most recent accomplishments.

Authorization Procedures

Petitions for the sterilization of a mentally diseased, feeble-minded, or epileptic person may be initiated by a county superintendent of welfare; or the head of a state institution. If the Board finds that the operation is for the best mental, moral or physical improvement of the patient, or for the public good, it may authorize the procedure.

The law establishing the Eugenics Board provides that no one participating in an au-

thorized sterilization shall be either civilly or criminally liable. This gives the surgeon protection which the consent to an operation signed by a person known to be insane, feeble-minded, or a minor, might not furnish.

Analysis of Authorized Sterilizations Since 1929

In the twenty-one years since its establishment in 1929, a total of 2,538 operations have been performed after authorization by the Eugenics Board⁽¹⁾. A great majority—2,030—have been performed on females. This is probably due to the fact that men are less willing to believe that the only effect of sterilization is the prevention of parenthood.

Sixty per cent, or 1,528 , of the operations have been performed by county institutions.

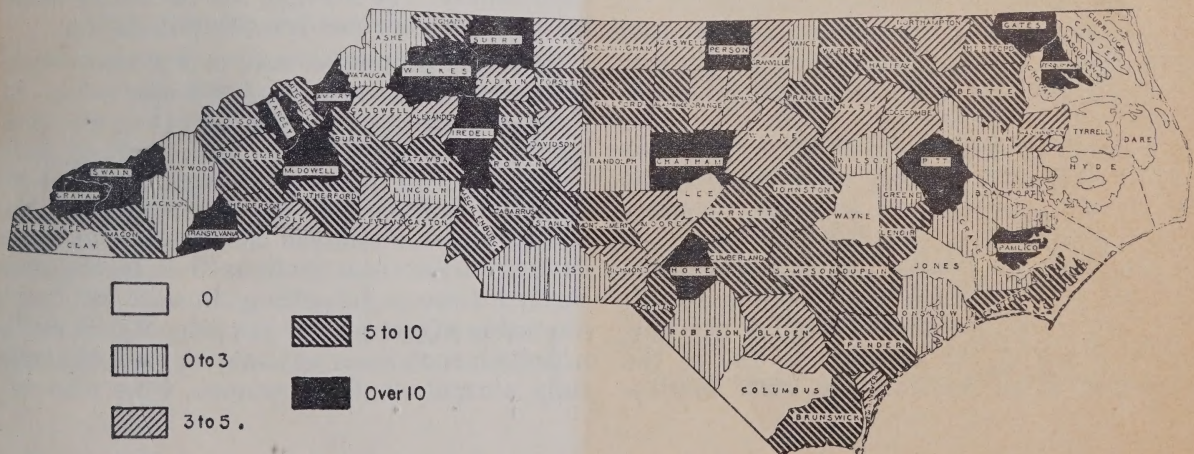


Fig. 1. Annual sterilization rate per 100,000 population, in North Carolina, July 1, 1948-June 30, 1950. (Source: Biennial Report of the Eugenics Board of North Carolina and U. S. Census, 1950.)

Although there are undoubtedly more persons outside of institutions for whom the operation is appropriate than there are within, the requirement that the county must provide the cost of non-institutional operations acts as a deterrent. County health budgets are generally inadequate to cover this form of preventive medicine.

Feeble-mindedness has been the basic reason for 1,697 (67 per cent) of the sterilizations, mental disease for 575 (23 per cent), and epilepsy for 266 (10 per cent).

In the majority of cases, salpingectomy or vasectomy was the procedure employed. Castration, though authorized by law, is employed only when indicated for reasons other than the prevention of parenthood. Only 60 male and 17 female castrations have been performed under the law, none of which were reported during the last biennium.

Of those sterilized under the law, 23 per cent were Negro. That this figure is lower than the proportion of Negroes in the population of the state—approximately one-third—is due partly to the fact that the state hospital caring for the Negro insane and feeble-minded has not had sufficient surgical services to perform many of these operations.

The Latest Biennium

Since July, 1947, better understanding of the eugenic sterilization law has resulted from the employment of a full-time secretary for the Eugenics Board. The 468 operations reported during the two years ending July 1, 1950, are more than in any similar previous period. Some of the increase is due to the protection of patients in five state institu-

tions where none had previously been sterilized. The total of those sterilized in institutions during the two years was 225, or 48 per cent of the total.

Non-institutional sterilizations also showed an increase, totaling 237, even though there were none in thirty-one of the 100 counties.

As in previous years, males were in the minority, constituting only 15 per cent of the total. The racial proportion (21 per cent Negro) shows little change from previous years.

Among the counties, Buncombe led in the number of protective sterilizations, with 24, followed by Guilford and Mecklenberg, with 22 each. Forsyth reported 19, Iredell and Pitt 15 each, Rowan 14, and Surry 12. When the number of operations is considered in relation to the 1950 population, Graham had the highest rate for the two years, with 29 per year per 100,000 population, Transylvania and Perquimans each had a rate of 26, Gates had 21, Swain 20, Avery 19, and McDowell 16. Figure 1 shows the rates for each county. The average for the entire state was 5.3 per year per 100,000 population.

That the protection rate is still increasing is shown by the report of 132 operations in the first half of 1950, and of 144 in the last half⁽²⁾.

The Sexual Effects of Tubectomy

Two recent studies in North Carolina have confirmed previous findings that in the majority of cases tubectomy is without demonstrable effect on the sex life. Woodside⁽³⁾, a British social worker, interviewed 48 mentally normal sterilized women. Five who re-

ported a slight decrease in sexual activity were outnumbered by eight who told of an increase. Similarly Garrison and Gamble found, among 50 mentally normal vasectomized males, 4 who stated that frequency of coitus had decreased, while 8 said it had increased⁽⁴⁾.

Eugenic Sterilization is Voluntary

The Eugenics Board states: "No attempts have ever been made to force persons to have the operation against their wishes." For the last two years, the written consent of the patient and that of the next of kin were on file for 522 of the 543 authorizations. For the remaining 21, hearings were held to meet the legal requirement. Operations have been performed, with the consent of the patient, following 17 of these hearings. The remaining 4 cases are still pending.

Failure to secure the consent of the next of kin may arise from causes other than opposition to the operation. For example, the husband of a separated couple may refuse to sign any papers relating to his wife.

The Results of Sterilization

Estimates of unfavorable heredity prevented by tubectomy are necessarily indirect. From the former birthrates of women sterilized in New Hampshire, Tietze and Johnson estimate that an average of 2.5 births each were prevented by sterilization⁽⁵⁾. Thirty-six per cent of the children born to these women before the operation were feeble-minded⁽⁶⁾. Assuming that this rate would have continued, the birth of 90 feeble-minded children was prevented by each 100 steriliza-

tions. The same authors estimated that birthrates among the sterilized males would have been half as great.

If the same percentages prevail in North Carolina, the 468 sterilizations of the last biennium will mean 390 fewer feeble-minded North Carolinians, an important accomplishment of this public health procedure.

That the percentages are similar in this state is indicated by a study, the beginning of which is described in the biennial report of the Eugenics Board⁽¹⁾. Mental examinations are being given to all accessible children born, before the operation, to persons sterilized in certain years. Of the 51 children thus far examined, 50 per cent had an intelligence quotient below 70.

That North Carolina has been spared the birth of a large number of unfortunate and undesirable citizens—potential victims of an unfavorable heredity and upbringing—is indicated by the fertility rates of those sterilized. At the average age of 24, the 468 persons sterilized during the biennium had had 873 children—an average of 1.86 each. Many otherwise fertile years still lie ahead.

The Need for Public Education

As with other procedures in preventive medicine, complete application is delayed by public ignorance. The effectiveness of the full-time secretary of the Eugenics Board in making its assistance readily available to the staffs of state institutions and county welfare superintendents, has done much to expand the protection of the next generation.

Public education is also being furnished by

another North Carolina group, the Human Betterment League, with headquarters in Winston-Salem. Through pamphlets and other educational media this organization is spreading the knowledge that sterilization can prevent an undesirable mental inheritance in the next generation, and that it involves no sexual sacrifice.

It is to be hoped that the work of these organizations can be supplemented by members of the medical and nursing professions, to whom the inquiring public will turn to learn of this new and little-understood procedure of disease prevention.

References

1. Biennial Report of the Eugenics Board of North Carolina, July 1, 1948 to June 30, 1950, Raleigh, N. C. (Earlier reports of the Board are also available. For statistics of sterilizations in previous years see also North Carolina M.J., 8:19-21 (Jan.) 1947; 9:75-78 (Feb.) 1948; and 10:129-132 (March) 1949.
2. North Carolina public welfare statistics, April, 1950-January, 1951.
3. Woodside, M.: Sexual and Psychological Adjustment of 48 Married Sterilized Women in North Carolina. West. J. Surg., 57:600-603 (Dec.) 1949.
4. Garrison, P. L., and Gamble, C. J.: Sexual Effects of Vasectomy, J.A.M.A., 144:293-295 (Sept. 23) 1950.
5. Tietze, C., and Johnson, B. S.: Observations on the Fertility of Patients Discharged from the Laconia State School, 1924 to 1934, Am. J. Ment. Deficiency 54: 551, 1950.
6. Johnson, B. S.: A study of Sterilized Persons from the Laconia State School, Am. J. Ment. Deficiency, 54: 404-408 (Jan.) 1950.

From:

THE HUMAN BETTERMENT LEAGUE
OF NORTH CAROLINA, INCORPORATED
P. O. BOX 3036
WINSTON-SALEM, N. C.

Sec. 34.66, P. L. & R.



Chancellor R. B. House
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, N. C.